

# PART VIII: Fish Tales – Lies, Lures & Legends

## Bay in the Balance



By DAVID CUTLER

It was the mid 1970s, an early Saturday night in late July, and the tide was just starting to turn. Charlie Bourget aboard his 21-foot Mako, "The Huntress," was maneuvering on the edge of the Kingston channel just off Standish Shore.

It was as though he was trying to park a Buick in Harvard Square. A few feet to the right, forward, then to the left. A little more to the right. Drop anchor off the port bow, then the starboard bow. Let the current do its work and two more anchors are dropped off the port and starboard stern. "The Huntress" was locked in.

As he waited for more water to move into the bay, Bourget leisurely chopped a mackerel into large chunks, baited four trolling rods with 30-pound test line and carefully cast them out. That done, he set the drags and placed the rods into four rod holders, two up front and two astern.

"It'll be a few minutes," he said, as he popped a beer and settled comfortably into his makeshift seat in the bow. His two guests sat atop a bait box in the stern, complying with his instructions to "keep it quiet." The only sounds came from shore.

"Anytime now," he said.

Twice during the next 20 minutes, he left his seat and quietly moved around the console to adjust the four anchor lines, keeping them taut so "The Huntress" would remain locked in place. As he was tightening the last line in the stern, the first low sound came from the starboard bow. "ZZ, ZZZ, ZZZZ." The rod bent and quivered as the line shot out. "ZZZZZZZZ."

"Here's the first one," yelled Bourget as he grabbed the rod, snapped the drag shut and yanked. The rod warped forward, the tip jerking wildly. On the other end, thrashing below, was what would prove a magnificent catch — a 37-inch, 38-pound striped bass. It would be



Charter skipper David Bitters hoists a keeper bass he caught in the bay.

the first of four big stripers hauled aboard "The Huntress" over the next hour. All were keepers in any age.

Bourget's success in landing big bass knew few bounds in those days. A week earlier, fishing off Bug Light, he had caught a 55-pound cow striped bass.



MAMMA MIA, WHAT A FISH — With smiles all around, Greg Smith and family pose with a massive cow striper taken while trolling off Duxbury Beach. (Courtesy of David Bitters)

that he later sold to Fiddler's Green (nee the Sun Tavern). Before serving it, proprietor David Wells had the prize on display in a bucket of ice. Up close, the fish seemed mammoth.

Duxbury Bay has as many fish stories as it does good fishermen and in recent years, after a prolonged dry spell in the '80s, the striped bass fishing is as good as it ever was. In late September, charter skipper David Bitters, fishing with clients in the bay, landed a 26-pound, 43-inch bass which he caught on a rubber crank bait.

"We were off a bank on the edge of a deep channel," he recalled. "I was down about 30 feet when the fish hit. Then he took off. He must have taken 180 yards of line. I was almost out."

With his drag set tight on a 20-pound test line, Bitters worried that the line would snap. To gain the upper hand, his set his flat boat into reverse, then saw his line snag on a lone lobster pot. "I thought the fish was gone; then one of the clients started pulling up the pot. He pulled in about 10 feet and there was the fish, wrapped around the pot (rope). It was something!"

With his flat boat, Bitters does a lot of fly fishing for bass and bluefish, using his own fly – the Baymen Universal. He's a practitioner of what he calls sight fishing. "You actually see the fish in shallow water, then cast. We look for boils, baitfish, rips and sometimes we chase the birds."

As a charter skipper for the past 34 seasons, Roger Jarvis has fished most everywhere, particularly at The Race off Provincetown which is renowned for superior blue fishing. But he's also had major successes in the bay aboard his 26-foot power cat, the "Jazz."

Two weeks ago, he spotted the familiar "boiling" mayhem that blues often create when chasing baitfish.

"It was a true feeding frenzy," he said. "Just east of the basin on the flats. The blues were going wild and it lasted for almost two hours. It was a genuine frenzy. You could throw anything at them – poppers, metal jigs, anything. They were chasing those small pogies (menhaden), the peanut bunkers we call them."

Jarvis can cite a long list of fish that can be caught in the bay – striped bass and blues, of course, but also mackerel, cod, pollock, tautog, black sea bass, dog fish, menhaden, smelt, winter flounder and fluke (summer flounder). Aside from the dogfish and occasional skate, the shark family stays out of the bay...with an occasional exception. Jarvis explains:

"I remember about three years ago when a guy caught a five-foot blue shark off the bridge. I kid you not. He was fishing for bass; he had a chunk on the bottom when the shark hit. It was probably chasing a school of baitfish up the channel. The guy brought it in. He fought it for a long time and it eventually tired and he walked the bridge to get it in."

The rare blue shark aside, Duxbury Bay is home to few exotic species. This writer once caught a sea trout (so identified by Carl Santheson at the Snug Harbor Fish Market) and once spotted a dead goosefish or monkfish on a flat off Standish Shore. Though tasty and in demand on seafood menus, the monkfish is singularly unattractive. It has a body shaped like a cone and is equipped with a giant mouth, which snaps shut on unsuspecting fish that come too close. Generally monkfish live on the bottom but occasionally one will swim to the surface.



## Some of the fish you may find in Duxbury Bay

Duxbury Bay is an Estuarine (deepwater tidal habitats and adjacent tidal wetlands brackish water)

### ANADROMOUS

grows in salt migrates to fresh to spawn

Alewife

- Blue Back Herring

- Striped Bass

- Rainbow Smelt

### CATADROMOUS

grows in fresh migrates to salt to spawn

American Eel

### SALTWATER

- Bluefish

- Flounder

- Tautog

- Cunner

- Scup

- Black sea bass

- Long horned sculpins

- Striped Sea Robin

- Menhaden (Pogies)

- Mackerel

- Mummichogs

- Striped Killfish

- Silversides

- Cod

- Periwinkles

- Rock, sand, and mud crabs

- Hemigrapsus

- European green crab

- Whelks (snails)

- Hermit crabs

- Horseshoe crabs

- Mussels (Blue & Ribbed)

- Shrimps

- Pollock

- Sharks (sand sharks)

- Spiny & Smooth dogfishes

- Skates

- Lobster

- Monkfish

- Razor clams

- Soft-shell clams

- Bay Scallops (few)

- Oysters

Source: Gregg Morris, Manomet Center for Conservation Science



And every once in a while, when a tern or seagull is diving for bait fish, it will end up in the jaws of the monkfish. It is not a pretty sight.

Both Bitters and Jarvis say the blues are starting to get bigger again – not as large as the 23 pounders that occasionally showed up in the late '70s and early '80s, but definitely bigger. Some as big as 14 pounds, said Jarvis.

The fluke population appears to be stable, but Jarvis says the winter flounder catch is down and he blames at least part of the decline on the fish-catching skills of cormorants, a black duck-like bird that dives deep to find its prey.



Adam Johnson of Stockade Path hauled this 41-inch prize while fishing off the bridge in June. He had to walk the bridge to bring it in from shore.